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# Before the Latest Contra Setback, U.S., in Review, Found the Outlook Poor

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**TEGUCIGALPA, Honduras, Dec. 14** — Even before the Iran arms affair jeopardized the Nicaraguan contras' chances of success, Administration officials were apparently re-evaluating the rebels' prospects.

Early last month a group of senior American officials visited Central America and asked United States ambassadors, intelligence analysts and military commanders why the contras were not as effective as the leftist rebels in El Salvador. Although weakened, the rebels fight effectively against the Salvadoran Army.

"We wondered why the Salvadoran guerrillas don't need \$100 million to keep fighting," an American official informed of the discussions said.

## Some Painful Answers

The answers were painful, according to two American officials, raising deep questions about the origins and direction of American policy toward Nicaragua and about the nature of the contra movement itself.

On a broader level, the review also raised questions about the so-called Reagan Doctrine under which support is given to anti-Communist guerrilla movements and about the theory of low-intensity conflict developed by Pentagon planners concerned with wars in the third world, where direct United States intervention is considered unwise.

With their support in Central America at an all-time low, the contras and their Administration backers are now in an 11th-hour scramble to reverse four years of failure before American money and Congressional tolerance run out for good. At this point almost no informed analyst gives the rebels much chance of success.

## The 'Long-Term Costs'

American diplomats and military officers in Central America are deeply worried by the poor prospects of the contras and say their collapse would significantly weaken the United States standing in the region.

"We've done this thing badly and a lot of people who have helped us are going to get hurt," an American official in Honduras said. "This is going to have long-term costs for us."

Military and political analysts in Central America say the contras share much of the blame for their feeble military and political performance, but they also fault the United States Government for its indecisive support of the rebels. In addition, they question the ability of the Central Intelligence Agency to sustain an effective guerrilla movement.

Gen. Paul F. Gorman, retired, who as commander of United States forces in Latin America was one of the architects of the rebel war against Nicaragua, now appears to be among the critics.

"I do not believe the Central Intelligence Agency is capable of mounting a successful insurgency, or supporting one for that matter," he was widely reported to have told an audience at the National War College last month. "And I do not see the Nicaraguan rebels as a likely alternative to the present Sandinista regime."

## Honduras Is Uneasy

Such doubts have grown sharply in Central America as the Iran arms affair has shaken confidence in the Reagan Administration and its policy of supporting the contras. The rebels have never looked so isolated, nor more dependent on Washington for their survival.

Honduras, long the contras' main sanctuary, is now openly demanding that they move their forces permanently into Nicaragua in the next six months.

In Costa Rica, the Government has closed down contra operations and President Oscar Arias Sánchez has called for a new political, rather than military, effort to force the Sandinistas to loosen their hold on power.

El Salvador is embarrassed by disclosures that it provided the main aerial supply base for the rebels and Guatemala pursues a policy it calls "active neutrality," criticizing the Sandinistas but also keeping the contras and Washington at arm's length.

"I have never been so pessimistic about the Sandinistas' intentions as now," said a senior Guatemalan official who often deals with the Nicaraguan Government. "But I don't believe in the contras either. In truth, the situation is extremely difficult."

A key Honduran political leader, a conservative, criticized the contras and also the Administration for what he said was its incompetence in handling them. "We spoke to several American officials recently and asked them what their goal was in Nicaragua, how the contras could achieve it, what the timetable is and what happens if it doesn't work," he said. "We realized that the people in Washington don't know the answers."

In Nicaragua itself, the contras can demonstrate no major political gains at a time when the Sandinistas' popularity is declining. Even opponents of the Sandinistas deride the rebels' lack of political talent.

"When the contras took towns like La Trinidad and San Rafael del Norte last year, they didn't even leave a slogan behind or hold a political meeting," Virgilio Godoy, leader of the struggling opposition Independent Liberal Party, said in an interview in Managua. "Why would anybody support an army like that?"

Such criticism in Central America and in the United States Congress has placed enormous pressure on the Administration to demonstrate that the contras do have a chance of success — pressure that American officials say will force major changes this year both in the rebel movement and in the way the United States has been supporting it.

The effort to revive the contras is well under way. If fully carried out, American officials say, the program will bring in new rebel commanders and undermine the present dominance of a clique of former Nicaraguan national guard officers and exiled rightist businessmen.

According to American and Honduran officials, a secret plan calls for the contras to move their main operations into Nicaragua where they will be supplied by air and sea from bases in Honduras and perhaps from islands off the Caribbean coast. The move is intended to force the rebels to act as guerrillas and stay in contact with the local populace, the officials say.

The Sandinistas, however, are sure to press the rebels hard, challenging their ability to remain inside Nicaragua where they have almost no support systems.

American advisers are now training at least 70 contra field commanders and C.I.A. advisers are working at the main rebel bases in Honduras, according to Western diplomats.

Those being trained include several Miskito Indians from the Atlantic coast region of Nicaragua and rebels from the so-called southern front near the Costa Rican border, according to rebel officials. These steps are partly intended to offset the present domination of the rebel movement by the Nicaraguan Democratic Force contra army based in Honduras, American and rebel officials say.

An effort will also be made to reform the Nicaraguan Democratic Force itself, American officials say, by encouraging greater independence for able field commanders and promoting guerrillas for competence rather than for demonstrating loyalty to the clique of former national guard commanders who have dominated the it.

By overseeing rebel training, strategy and supplies, American officials say they intend to eliminate the circle of cronies and incompetent middlemen that have helped control the main contra army.

In addition, officials say, a new rebel human rights office financed by \$3 million provided by Congress will identify and punish human rights violators within the rebel movement, a promise few outside analysts believe will be kept.

In the meantime, a new rebel radio station will broadcast more sophisticated propaganda to Nicaragua where, American officials fervently hope, discontended Nicaraguans will start to back the contras more openly.

Such a program, paid for with part of the \$100 million of American aid approved by Congress this year, may show greater results inside Nicaragua than critics of the contras have predicted. Despite their many failings, the contras appear to have more support in the Nicaraguan countryside than their detractors have conceded and have operated deep behind Sandinista lines for much of the year.

#### Obstacles to Success

But there are enormous obstacles to the success of the venture. The Sandinistas have a formidable army and an effective counterinsurgency program. Reforming a rebel army in the midst of war would be hard at the best of times and probably impossible with continued Congressional support in doubt.

In addition, the rebel movement is still afflicted by the internal problems that have always limited its effectiveness.

Well aware that their powers are threatened, the leaders of the Nicaraguan Democratic Force in Honduras and their civil associates have formed a regional military council and a political party to consolidate their control.

They have also become more active in the Nicaraguan exile community, effectively taking control of an advisory political assembly that was intended to broaden the rebels' political representation. The assembly now backs Adolfo Calero, the head of the Nicaraguan Democratic Force.

In a further sign of internal power struggles, the main Nicaraguan businessmen's organization in exile condemned the two most liberal rebel leaders, Arturo Cruz and Alfonso Robelo, two months ago as former collaborators with the Sandinistas and demanded that additional directors not tainted in that way be named to the umbrella rebel movement.

#### Rivalries Weaken Group

This movement, the American-backed United Nicaraguan Opposition, remains weakened by internal rivalries and has also failed to begin a concerted diplomat effort to explain its political program.

"For all their efforts we still look upon them as a creation of the United States," a European diplomat in El Salvador said.

The group is directed by Mr. Calero, Mr. Cruz and Mr. Robelo. Of the three, Mr. Calero is the strongest, consistently outmaneuvering Mr. Cruz and Mr. Robelo, whose own bases of support in the exile community appear weak. A new alliance may be forged with Alfredo César, an able exile leader who commands the rebel Southern Opposition Bloc in Costa Rica. But time appears to be running out.

In reviewing the rebel shortcomings, several America and Central American officials contend that the handling of the contra movement over the last four years has been a textbook example of how to fail in a guerrilla war.

They single out the C.I.A. for particular blame, criticizing the agency for relying so strongly on the defeated Nicaraguan national guard and for following a primitive concept of insurgency that has consistently over-emphasized military actions for the contras while almost ignoring their political organization and the creation of a popular political program.

"The contras skipped steps one through three in guerrilla war and went directly to military action," said an American diplomat who monitors the rebels. "It was a big mistake."

#### The Argentine Role

The C.I.A. made matters worse, its critics contend, by using Argentine trainers whose own "dirty war" against Marxist rebels would end in state terror and public repudiation in Argentina, and by creating a traditional Latin American peasant army that failed to attract middle-class support and depends on vulnerable supply lines to fixed bases in Honduras.

The C.I.A. compounded its errors by assuring the rebels that they would soon be in Managua and that, if necessary, the Reagan Administration would provide the backing to get them there, rebel officials say. Such overoptimism and an expectation of a future American-led invasion did little to encourage the contras to develop a base of support for a long war, critical American officials say.

The one rebel leader who tried to do things differently was Edén Pastora Gómez, a former Sandinista commander. His effort collapsed in mutual re-  
criminations with the C.I.A. this year.

But even as the odds grow against the Administration's long-held policy of relying on the contras to force internal changes in Nicaragua, analysts and government officials in the region see no easy alternative.

Instead, most diplomats predict a difficult time ahead in which the Sandinistas will consolidate their hold on power while new political and military efforts are made in the region to contain the Nicaraguan revolution.